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ABSTRACT

Participatory decision-making strategies have been suggested as effective in groups with the task of solving unstructured problems or creating innovations. Concerned about evaluating children's affective growth in open classrooms, eight educators in a large metropolitan area agreed to meet regularly after school hours to develop an instrument to assess affective growth in children. The five teachers and three administrators who formed the Open Education Evaluation Group (OEEG) were drawn from five local elementary schools and shared an interest in open education. The case study of the OEEG suggests that there may be important differences between the desire of the group participants to use these strategies and their ability to use them effectively. After 15 months the OEEG, using participatory strategies, failed to accomplish its goal. The presentation focuses on problems in four areas that appeared to have implications for the OEEG's failure: skill level, consensus decision-making, self-oriented needs, and hierarchical differentiation. (Author/MLF)

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# PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING IN A LOCALIST TASK GROUP: A CASE STUDY

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> Investigators and theorists have not focused hard enough, long enough, nor carefully enough on the small and mundane as well as the large and important issues and problems necessary for idealistic practitioners to carry out their dreams. (Smith and Keith, 1971, p. vi)

Participatory decision making is a method of group functioning purported to be effective in addressing group or organizational problems. Participatory groups differ in their organization and procedures from the more typical hierarchical, chairperson led group in three ways: Superordinates and subordinates work together as equals rather than in a hierarchical arrangement. Task leadership is diffused among the members rather than the sole responsibility of a chairperson. Decisions are generally made through consensus rather than by voting or referendum procedures.

The advantages of participatory group procedures are said to be several. Participatory strategies are purported to maximize the inclusion, input and responsibility of all members in the decision making process. The group therefore becomes more efficient in satisfying members' personal goals (Gordon, 1955; Likert, 1961). The leadership functions are diffused among all of the members. This is said to enhance group effectiveness because different leaders emerge depending upon the issue at hand and upon the recognized competencies of the participants (Argyris, 1964; Gibb, 1965; Horowitz and Perlmuter, 1970). Full and free communication take place between members without regard to ascribed rank (Bennis and Slater, 1968; Leavitt, 1972). Participatory strategies are said to be particularly effective in groups where the task goals are unstructured and where the goal of the group is innovation or creative problem solving (Bragg and Andrews, 1973; Fullan, 1972; Goodlad, Klein and Associates, 1970). Members of participatory groups are also thought more likely to be committed to the decisions made by the group and to the implementation of the products which emerge as a

result of the group's efforts because they have had input into the solution (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Tannenbaum, 1966; Thompson, 1969).

In-depth studies of natural task groups using a participatory style of working are few. Therefore, Prior to urging the adoption of participatory decision making it would be wise to consider the problems groups and organizations may encounter in their attempts both to implement participatory decision making procedures and to accomplish a task utilizing this process. The remainder of this article will address these problems by reporting on a case study of one work group which attempted to use participatory decision making procedures and which failed to reach its objectives using these group processes.

## Background

Concerned about evaluating children's affective growth in open classrooms, eight educators in a large metropolitan area agreed to meet regularly after school hours to develop an instrument to assess affective growth in children. The five teachers and three administrators who formed what will be called the Open Education Evaluation Group (OEEG) where drawn from five local elementary schools and shared an interest in open education. In their deliberations the group members adopted participatory group procedures: the members did not designate a chairperson; decisions were generally made through consensus; it was hoped each member would have an equal voice in deciding matters which came before the group.

Several conditions seemed likely to facilitate the group's work. Rather than having its objectives and procedures prescribed by other persons, the specific task and the processes the group would employ in attempting to accomplish the task were to be defined by the OEEG members. Based on the

principle that people tend to support what they create, it was assumed the group members would be committed to their work in the group. The members agreed to give the OEEG meeting times a high priority. They were willing to miss other meetings to attend OEEG sessions. Adequate financial resources were available to the group. The project had been funded by a $5000 foundation grant. This money was to be used to purchase materials, to provide honoraria and expenses for outside consultants who would help the group with the more technical aspects of instrument development and to pay the travel and lodging expenses of the members for retreats and trips they might choose to take in pursuit of the group's objectives. And finally, the group was composed of individuals who had extensive training in education. All the members held master's degrees or were working on one. Two members had earned doctorates. In sum, the group seemed to operate under favorable conditions: the group's product and procedures were to be selected by the members; the participants were committed to devoting time to their work; they were well-funded; and they had extensive graduate training in education.

The members' efforts to develop an instrument were observed during twenty-four meetings held over the course of fifteen months. During this time the Open Education Evaluation Group failed to develop a finished product. Between September, when the group first convened, and January the group members struggled to define their task. At a two day retreat in January the members decided to develop an instrument to assess responsibility in children in open and conventional classrooms. By the beginning of March they had developed a partial checklist instrument. In April and May they tried to write an article based on their work. During a meeting in mid-May they developed an in-service game on responsibility which, in the words of the members, "bombed" in a pilot test of this product. Following a summer break, the group met with an outside consultant and decided to begin observing children's

behaviors in classroom settings. In short, between September and December of the following year the group developed no finished product: neither a checklist instrument, inservice game, article or a product derived from classroom observations. Hours of effort resulted in no tangible outcome. The remainder of this article suggests some of the reasons for this failure.

## Methodology

The principal investigator assumed the role as the OEEG's recorder after a group member, who had served in this capacity for one meeting, decided she could not be an active and effective contributor to the group's discussions as long as she assumed these secretarial functions. The group members agreed to allow the researcher to study the group as a quid pro quo for writing and distributing the meeting minutes. The research role assumed by the investigator was that of observer-as-participant (Gold, 1958; Junker, 1960). In this role the observer refrained from any verbal interchanges with the participants during the meetings. Having neither a personal voice in the substantive areas of the discussions nor a personal stake in the outcomes of the group's work, the observer/recorder could be said to have been "in" the OEEG but not "of" the group.

The data for this study were collected using participant observation methods. Besides observing twenty-four working meetings of the OEEG, each of the eight group members was interviewed twice and documents pertaining to the group were collected. The actual proceedings of the meetings, special events and interviews were recorded on a tape recorder. The tapes were then transcribed. Supplemented by field notes, summary observation notes and the collected documents, the transcripts provided a data base which was as close to the actual proceedings of the OEEG as possible, barring the use of several strategically placed tape recorders or video tape cameras. In brief, every effort was made to obtain a complete and accurate record both of the activities in which the group was involved and of the group members' attitudes toward these activities.

During the analysis process all of the data were reviewed. Much of the data was cut up and both referenced and cross referenced in event and conceptual categories. In the beginning the conceptual categories were neither well defined or delimited. However, as the number of instances of the same or similar phenomena were grouped together, concepts which referred to particular features of a phenomenon began to take shape. The incidents which comprised a particular category therefore

became the bases upon which several concepts were formulated. The incidents were continually compared with one another to make certain they were characteristic illustrations of the same concept or phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). During the process of comparing the properties of various concepts, the conditions under which various phenomena were produced and minimized and the relationships between various properties of different phenomena became evident. The final step in the analytical process was the identification of hypotheses and generalizations based upon the relationships between concepts.

## Findings

The analysis of the data from the OEEG meetings and interviews suggested four apparent reasons for the group's difficulties in successfully accomplishing the task using participatory decision making strategies: 1) the members neither possessed the requisite skills to accomplish the task nor did they seek the necessary expertise from outside sources; 2) the members' attempts to satisfy self-oriented needs appeared to interfere with their ability to attend to the task; 3) the participants experienced difficulties in using consensus decision making to resolve critical issues; 4) they were unable to erase the effect that formal status differences had on the members.

### Competence[1]

Two assumptions typically motivate those who urge group problem solving by

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[1]Competence can be defined as having or possessing sufficient ability or skills to effect a particular outcome. In other words the use of the term competence will be confined to a particular situation. When it is suggested that a person or the OEEG as a body of individuals, did not possess the competence to do something, it is in reference to a particular task for which they did not possess sufficient skills. That is not to say that the people were incompetent. To refer to a person or to a group as incompetent appears to suggest a more general notion--the total or almost total lack of ability. The use of this more generalized term would be misleading.

practitioners rather than by outside experts. Some authors suggest that practitioner participation in the development of innovations will enhance the practitioners' commitment to those innovations because they are likely to support what they have created (Fullan, 1972; Goodlad, Klein and Associates, 1970; NIE, 1973, 1975). Kelley and Thibaut (1969) argue for example:

> The coordinated joint action of many members necessary to the achievement of most group goals requires wide acceptance of the solution and an adequate understanding of it. If general participation in developing and planning a means heightens understanding of it and commitment to it, the group problem-solving process may be more economical in the long run than one that begins with the most expert thought and advice. (p. 87)

Others who urge practitioner participation in problem solving groups seem primarily impelled by the belief that persons closest to the problem are more aware of their own needs and thus are better able to develop innovations which will fulfill these needs. Cook and Morgan (1971) offer the following argument in support of this claim:

> It could be said that the amateur [practitioner] himself is really an "expert" in certain matters--whether because of the learning experience of the participation process or because of knowledge acquired in normal activity. . . . To extend a venerable democratic argument, they [practitioners] will know where and why the shoe pinches as well as what ought to be done. (p. 12)

Authors such as Cook and Morgan appear to assume that because practitioners are close to the problem and have the desire to find a solution they also will possess the requisite knowledges or will know how to obtain the necessary assistance to accomplish the task. The analysis of the OEEG's failure raises questions about this assumption.

None of the members of the OEEG had formal training in tests and measurement. The members also chose neither to review the literature on test construction nor to look at affective tests developed by others. They avoided such a search because of the time it would involve and because they did not want to be limited by other people's ideas. The group members did however experience a great deal of

frustration in their attempts to develop an instrument which would assess the affective behaviors of children. Laments such as the following were heard:

> Sometimes I think we are over our heads. We don't know what we are talking about. We are experts, but not in this field. (Teacher A, Transcript 2/5, p. 9)

> I don't have the expertise needed at this point. . . . I'm not a statistician; I'm not a test man. I know I could throw down some items and they could all get cleaned up later, but this is not my area. I don't know anything about it; and I'm fumbling around like a novice. (Principal B, First Interview, p. 18)

The group members often stated, particularly during the interviews, that they lacked the requisite skills to accomplish their task. The group, however, continued to function. Several factors suggest why they did not abandon their work. The analysis indicates that the participants "fell into" various patterns of behavior which allowed them to continue to meet without having to seriously address the competence question.

Abstract Discussions. One way in which the members seemed to avoid having to face the issue of competence was by keeping the discussions during their meetings at an abstract level. The analysis suggests that the more concrete the discussions became, the more likely the members were to have to confront their inadequacies. Therefore, when discussions approached the concrete level, there appeared to be pressures to return to an abstract discussion of the group's work. The group generally began by discussing some facet of the task at an abstract level. When the time came for the members to operationalize their concepts, their conversation frequently returned to a more abstract or philosophical aspect of a different topic, often one which was only tangentially related to the original topic. Two group members spoke of this phenomenon:

> This group is not getting down to the concrete on anything. We are philosophizing . . . . The first two or three months it was almost imperative that we have this philosophical going back and forth to get a purpose generated. And I in no way suggest that we are ready to come up with a total instrument to take out and test, but I do feel very strongly that we are going to have to at least start being more concrete. (Teacher C, Transcript 2/5, p. 21)

> This group is good philosophically, and there are some of us who are better than others in rambling and talking and making our own points in the group and being dramatic about it. But that doesn't help to produce an artifact [an instrument]. (Principal B, First Interview, pp. 11-12)

Abandoning Projects. This same phenomenon--a reticence or inability to go from the abstract to the concrete--can be seen in a second practice of the group. On three different occasions between April and November the members made substantial progress on a particular project. However, rather than see that project through to completion, the participants essentially abandoned their work and began a new project. It seemed that as they attempted to move from the abstract to the concrete, the members encountered problems with which they were not competent to deal. Rather than confront their inadequacies they moved on to another project. The funding agency noted this problem in their refusal to fund the group for a second year. One group member summarized the board members' concern:

> Some of the people [on the Executive Board of the funding agency] don't feel that the OEEG produced what it should have produced last year. The analogy they used was that we had gotten to the one yard line with two of the projects and now we are proposing to go back to the fifty yard line and change our whole game plan. (Teacher C, Transcript 11/8, p. 4)

Unwillingness to confront inabilities appeared to result in several changes in the group's "game plan." Such a pattern enabled the members to continue their associations as a group. The pattern had, however, obvious dysfunction for task accomplishment.

Task Avoidance. The most obvious way in which the members of the OEEG avoided the question of the group's competence was by avoiding work on the task altogether. The clearest illustration of this behavior could be seen during the two meetings which followed a two day January retreat. During the retreat the members had come to several agreements about the group's direction and goals. The members voiced optimistic feelings that these decisions would facilitate their progress on the task over the next few weeks. However, they spent the two meetings following the retreat

talking about events which were happening in their schools and about other issues which were only tangentially related to the task. One of the teacher members of the group speculates about why the OEEG experienced difficulty in attending to the task after the retreat:

> Maybe we had a basic approach avoidance conflict. You know, I think we were so close. We were really approaching getting somewhere. But we were also approaching the point of saying 'we're really going to have something' or 'no we really can't put this together at all, and we are going to have nothing.' I don't know if there was some fear of that that kept us from maybe going quite . . . pushing as hard as we could so we would go right over the brink. (Interviewer: Are you saying maybe that the group was worried that either it had to produce or that it wouldn't be able to produce and that maybe it was afraid of finding out that it couldn't do it?) Yeah, I think that is part of it. (Teacher E, First Interview, p. 9)

In summary, many researchers who state a preference for task groups composed of practitioners suggest that innovations developed by such groups will be implemented with greater ease because the participants will better understand and be more committed to innovations they helped to create. Those who suggest the involvement of locally based practitioners assume that the practitioners "will know where and why the shoe pinches as well as what ought to be done." This assumption may be correct in some cases; however, one cannot always assume that knowledge of the pinching shoe indicates that there is expertise within the group to deal with it. Nor can it be assumed that the members will face such inabilities openly. Various patterns of behavior in a group may blind the participants from considering limited competencies as a problem.

## Self-Oriented Needs

The analysis of the OEEG data suggests that the group's failure was a multifaceted phenomenon. Some of the ways in which the members avoided confronting the competence question have been suggested. The question remains, however, why the group members wanted to continue meeting if the group did not seem to be accomplishing

anything. This question leads to a discussion of the second factor which had negative outcomes for task accomplishment--the influence of self-oriented needs.

Some of the difficulties the members of the OEEG experienced in accomplishing their task appeared to stem from the members' attempts to satisfy their more self-oriented needs, particularly their needs for status and esteem both within and outside of the group and their needs for affiliation. In this presentation our attention will be confined to a discussion of the hypothesized effect of the need for affiliation. A discussion of the effect of the other two self-oriented needs can be found in another source (Wood, 1977).

The creation of an instrument to assess affective development in children was the ostensive reason why the group members met. There was, however, evidence that a prevailing desire among the group members for affiliation with like-minded educators may have been just as important, if not more so, than creating an educational product. The members themselves indicated that associating with other persons in the field of open education and getting to know these people played a very important part in their reasons for having joined and maintained their membership in the group. Enjoying the people in the group was not in itself a deterrent to task accomplishment, for it could have been a positive factor. The need for affiliation appeared, however, to perpetuate certain behaviors which did not facilitate the group's work on the task.

Social Orientation of the Meetings. First, during the interviews and occasionally during the meetings, the members admitted that the more social aspects of their meetings seemed to interfere with their ability to make progress on specifying and accomplishing the task. Though their discussions usually revolved around some aspect of the task, these discussions appeared to represent a "social orientation"[2] rather

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[2]Social orientation can be defined as a conversation aimed at verbalizing ideas rather than at actually resolving issues, similar to the philosophical conversations held among friends when they talk about such issues as politics, education, religion and about the ultimate meaning of life).

than a task orientation. The following series of statements, made at various times during the group's life, suggest examples of the manner in which the social orientation of the OEEG tended to impede the group's progress on the task:

> Principal C: If we started off our meetings a little more task oriented . . . Maybe it [this group] is just so enjoyable as a social group that it gets me off and I come in kind of . . . .
>
> Principal B: Wanting to chat with friends.
>
> Principal C: Yeah, we are just too darn amenable to each other and just enjoy talking about school and whatever. (Transcript 1/29, p. 23)
>
> Principal B: Somehow this seems like a group to me, not a committee.
>
> Teacher A: It's a bunch of friends! (Transcript 4/4, pp. 1-2)

And:

> Everybody enjoyed everybody else so much socially at the retreat and that carried over. The work didn't carry over but the social part did . . . . The group wasn't strictly task oriented and that did hinder us after the retreat. (Teacher E, Second Interview, pp. 9, 24)

Avoidance of Task Work Outside the Meetings. A second behavior which appeared to be perpetuated by a desire for affiliation was the members' tendency to avoid task related work outside of the meetings. During the seventh session of the OEEG one of the members suggested that each person work on the task outside of the meeting time and bring mimeographed copies of their ideas to the meetings. The other members approved of this format. In practice however, the success of this plan was, by the members' own admission, very limited. Few members completed work outside of the group meetings.

It could be hypothesized that other obligations interferred with the members' ability to attend to the homework assignments. All of the participants had several responsibilities in addition to their jobs and their work with the OEEG. Teacher A, however, rejected this hypothesis:

> I don't know why I haven't put a lot of energy outside of this group into this group. I don't want to say I'm so busy I haven't had the time because I take time for the things that matter. I'm not with this task, but I love coming to the meetings. (Transcript 2/5, p. 8)

A more likely explanation suggests that the members did not spend much time outside the meetings working on tasks relevant to the OEEG because the social aspects of the group were missing when the work was done outside of the meetings. In an interview Principal C provided support for this explanation:

> Homework never got done. The group just unspokenly faced the fact. And it is possibly related that one of the things that was holding us together was the social part of it. Even when we had workshops we all enjoyed each other. Well, you can't enjoy each other when you're all doing homework. So we weren't getting people that were doing homework. (Second interview, p. 32)

Avoidance of Conflict Producing Discussions. The third way in which the need for affiliation appeared to hinder the OEEG's progress can be seen in the members' tendency to avoid conflict producing discussions during their meetings. A careful examination of the meeting transcripts revealed that the individuals who comprised the OEEG held differing ideas about various aspects of the group's task. There seemed to be a tendency for the members to sidestep a discussion of these differences, particularly during the first several months of meetings. They tended to view conflict as a negative and dissociative phenomenon. Because they feared that an open expression of their differences would lessen the probability that the group would continue, the members tended to avoid the expression of conflict. The consequence of this pattern was that the members avoided conflict which, if resolved successfully, would have furthered the group's work.

During the second set of interviews the OEEG members spoke of this tendency in the group:

> I didn't want to raise a big fight with Teacher B. I didn't want to confront. . . . I'm holding back and being polite. (Principal A, p. 14)

> We may be awfully fearful of hurting anybody's feelings. We sure accept a lot of shit from people. . . . We take responsibility for somebody else's feelings. It is sheer stupidity, but that is what we do. (Principal B, pp. 20, 37)

> Conflict just never came out in the open with our group; but you see, I think conflict is healthy. I can't deal with this other type of thing where everything is all right when I know it's not. (Teacher B, p. 57)

> I would say that the group was controlled in a negative sense--it was nice and polite. All the confidence and friendliness and trustworthiness of the group doesn't exist. If it did exist, the hostility would come out easily. There are too many underlying hostilities, too many undercurrents bouncing back and forth between members of that group which don't allow for trustworthiness, concern and confidence. And as a result, they don't bring it out for fear of rupture. So it stays under even when they get down to critical issues . . . . They're afraid to bring out their real feelings. (Teacher D, p. 8)

The tendency of the members to avoid the expression of conflict within their meetings led to what might be labeled "pseudo-group unity." The relative absence of conflict and the presence of a general toleration for ambiguity, equivocation and relatively easy accommodation led the members of the OEEG to act as if their ideas were more in harmony on certain issues than they in fact were. To a degree, the data from the OEEG meetings suggest that the members had unconsciously agreed not to disagree.

Briefly then, the members' attempts to fulfill their self-oriented needs for affiliation appeared to hinder the group members' ability to accomplish the task. At times it seemed as if the members were more committed to the "group as a group" than to the group as a committee with a task to accomplish. The data suggest that the social flavor of the group meetings tended to interfere with a commitment to task accomplishment. The members generally did not attend to homework assignments, presumably because they did not enjoy working on the task if they were separated from the other members. They tended to avoid conflict producing discussions. The members held differing opinions on various issues, but they tended to sidestep the discussion of these differences particularly during the first several months.

The tendency of self-oriented needs to interfere with task accomplishment does not appear to be unique to the OEEG. One of the most dramatic parallel instances of this phenomenon was recounted by Janis (1972), who reported on a group in which the affiliation motive was so strong that the original goals of the group were subverted. While Janis conducted research at a clinic to help people stop smoking,

he noticed that as the time for the final meeting approached, various group members exerted pressure on each other to increase, rather than decrease, the number of cigarettes they smoked. Janis observed that the group members were not rewarded for stopping smoking. On the contrary, they were chastized by the other members for doing so. Other needs were being met through the meetings that would have been unfulfilled had the group sessions terminated. In both the group Janis observed and in the OEEG motives members brought to the group appeared to impede task accomplishment.

Decision Making

Consensus decision making is a common feature of participatory groups. Consensus has been defined as a state of affairs in which the members reach agreement after they have deliberated the pros and cons of an issue for a period of time sufficient to allow everyone in the group to feel that he or she has had a fair chance to influence the decision (Holder, 1972; Mansbridge, 1973). The assumption is that if the discussion is open enough to allow everyone to speak, the participants will take the opportunity to voice their opinions and major differences will be resolved. Also, in a participatory group the functions typically designated to a chairperson are distributed among the members. Two assumptions appear to lie behind the decision not to designate a chairperson: 1) all of the participants have the ability to perform these functions and 2) the participants will accept the responsibility for performing these functions. The data from the OEEG suggest that these assumptions merit examination.

Statements made during several OEEG meetings suggested that the group members chose to use consensus decision making procedures for three reasons. First, the members, who had a strong commitment to group harmony, felt that if all members had input into decisions, harmony and consistent task direction would be maintained.

Second, they felt it was important that the participants truly "hear all persons out" and not arrive at closure prematurely. The members reported that in other groups of which they had been members, voting had resulted in premature closure. As a result, persons whose ideas had not been dealt with sufficiently became upset and were unable to attend to other issues. Third, the participants felt it was important that all of the members be in concert because any product which resulted from the group's efforts would be widely disseminated if all the concerns voiced by the group members had been resolved.

Though the participants were committed to using consensus as a decision making procedure, they experienced a great degree of difficulty in achieving closure through this method. In frustration one of the group members claimed:

> This group cannot get closure on anything! It can't finalize anything, even the smallest little thing. (Principal B, Second Interview, p. 48)

An analysis of the data from the OEEG meetings and interviews suggests that several factors contributed to the difficulties the group experienced in achieving closure through consensus. Two of the most potent factors will be discussed here. First, the members often assumed consensus had been reached when in fact it had not. Second, various task holding mechanisms, which in other types of groups assist the members in resolving issues, were absent from or ineffectively utilized in the OEEG.

Consensus Assumed Rather Than Obtained

> You know, we're so informal we don't have to do that [have someone assume the function of asking if consensus exists]. At least I find that we are moving toward consensus lots of times without ever beginning to verbalize it in the sense of directly verbalizing it. (Principal C, First Interview, p. 13)

The above illustration suggests the attitude held by some of the participants about the group's use of consensus. This attitude suggests a factor which appeared to hinder the group's ability to resolve issues. The group members were prone to discuss a topic for a lengthy period of time. Rather than ascertain, either formally

or informally, whether there was agreement, however, the members would move to the discussion of another topic because several members believed consensus had been obtained. No systematic attempt would be made to learn if the members in fact had reached agreement. Teacher B captures this tendency in the following words:

> We would think we had closure on something and then the next meeting it was brought up anew, fresh. And all of this was very frustrating. (Transcript 9/19, p. 2)

Several factors contributed to this phenomenon. One of the most persistent was the members' use of words which had various connotations to different members. The members tended to believe that a special type of likemindedness existed within the group. All of the participants were involved in open education. They believed they were on the same "wave length." As a result, they tended to assume that the words they used in their discussions were uniformly defined by the participants. They did not realize, nor did they probe to find out, that they often had conflicting definitions for the same term. For example, all but two of the members wanted to create a unique educational product which would be unlike a standardized test. Determining the validity and reliability of their product, was, therefore, unimportant to them. The remaining two members did see their goal to be that of creating a standardized instrument. To them validity and reliability were matters of legitimate concern. In their discussions both groups used words and phrases which are commonly associated with test construction and measurement procedures. Both groups referred to the proposed product as "an instrument," "a measurement tool," and an "evaluation tool." However, both groups had strikingly different referents in mind as they used these terms. The members assumed they had reached consensus on what was to be the product of the group's work--"an instrument." In fact, they continued their discussions without realizing they had not reached consensus at all.

The analysis suggests that other terms were also used as if they meant the same thing to all of the participants. When some of the members suggested that the

construct "responsibility" be defined in "educational" rather than in "psychological" terms, it was assumed that placing "educational" on the opposite end of the continuum from "psychological" automatically defined the form their "instrument" would take. One member formulated a definition of the concept of "responsibility," however, the members did not spend sufficient time refining that definition so that it would guide their "instrument" construction efforts. The members used phrases such as "open classroom" and "traditional classroom" without paying much attention to the possibility that personal definitions of these terms may have differed. In short, the members used phrases and concepts which were not "primitive terms" (Zetterberg, 1965). Rather, key terms were variously defined by the members. Because the members thought they held common definitions, they did not feel it was necessary to establish concrete definitions. Their failure to define these concepts hindered their ability to realize that their personal meanings often differed. As Ichheiser (1949) suggests, the participants did not understand that they did not understand; and, therefore, they made errors in interpreting what each other said.

Absence of Task Holding Mechanisms. In participatory groups leadership roles are diffused among various members of the group rather than embodied in one person (Benne and Sheats, 1948; Horowitz and Perlmutter, 1970). The members of the OEEG did not select a chairperson, but neither did they accept those responsibilities usually designated to the chairperson--initiating structure, soliciting contributions to the discussions, providing clarification and summaries of member contributions and testing for a sense of the members' positions on various issues. Teacher A reveals her frustration over the failure of the participants to fulfill these roles:

> I think that one of the things that I am frustrated with is we may each be leaders out in our own spheres, but when we get together none of us takes that role and keeps us to task. (Transcript 2/22, p. 29)

One might expect that the three administrators in the group would have assumed the chairperson functions. They did not, however. They were committed to the egalitarian spirit of participatory decision making and made conscious efforts not to

be perceived as an administrator or as the administrative chairperson of the group. The teacher members of the group had difficulty assuming these functions because several of the other members did not tend to follow their attempts to initiate structure. (The reasons for this failure are suggested in the final section on "Hierarchical Differentiation.")

Other task holding mechanisms were absent or ineffectively utilized by the group. As a general rule the members did not devise effective agendas for their meetings. Also, they were not attentive to the time deadlines specified in the original proposal. In brief, those mechanisms (i.e., chairperson, agendas, time deadlines) which in other groups tend to facilitate focused attention on the task and which tend to encourage the members to resolve various issues were for all practical purposes absent from the OEEG. This absence tended to increase the informality of the group meetings and to decrease the emphasis on concrete decision making.

Hierarchical Differentiation

Three reservations are raised about bringing people from different hierarchical levels together to work on a task: 1) it is difficult for subordinates to oppose the judgment of persons with higher formal status; 2) subordinates are less willing to voice their ideas in the group; 3) a high rate of idea initiation, representing a competition for respect, is curtailed by the presence of ascribed status differences (Blau and Scott, 1962; Bridges, Doyle and Mahan, 1968; Hare, 1962). Because of the tendency of individuals to defer to or not compete with those of a higher formal status, subordinates who possess the correct solution to a problem or whose ideas merit serious consideration may be closed out. Formal authority or position is not necessarily the equivalent of effective authority. It is assumed, however, that in a participatory group where there is an emphasis both upon freedom of

expression and upon equal deference being given to the ideas of all participants, the person with the correct solution will be allowed to suggest it and his or her suggestion will be given consideration commensurate with the consideration given to the ideas of persons who possess higher ascribed status (Bennis and Slater, 1968; Berkowitz, 1965; Mansbridge, 1973; Miles, 1964; Mills, 1967). The data from the present study suggest that this equalization does not necessarily take place when group members utilize participatory strategies.

The members of the OEEG were philosophically committed to the principle of equal treatment of ideas whether these ideas emanated from a principal or teacher. The administrative members of the group even attempted to lessen the influence which would be attributed to their ascribed status by essentially refusing to direct the group (i.e., assume the task maintenance functions). However, the data from the meetings and interviews indicated that those members who held administrative positions were generally perceived to be the opinion leaders of the OEEG and that the teacher members seemed to defer to the suggestions of these individuals. Two of the teacher members spoke to this point when they made the following comments:

> Leadership in our group always was a function of how we were when we began. If you were an administrator, you were a leader. If you were a teacher, you were not a leader. (Teacher D, Second Interview, p. 35)

> I didn't push as hard in this group as I have in other groups partly because I trusted them [the administrators] sort of automatically because of their labels like Head of Whitworth School and Head of Beechmont School. . . . I would automatically presume that they could be the experts or if they weren't the experts then that was their tough luck, and I didn't have to jump in there and lead everybody to some sort of mecca. That was their role because they had these titles. (Teacher A, Second Interview, p. 3)

That the members' philosophical commitment of working together as equals was not actualized in their behavior can be seen in the sociometric data gathered about the group members. These data, collected at three different points in the group's life, suggested not only that the administrators were perceived to be the most influential but they were also reputed to be the ones whose opinions were valued

most highly by the group members. Observational data also indicated that many of the important decisions were made as a direct result of the urging of one or more of the administrators.

Upon examination of this data it might be argued that the administrators were generally more able than the teachers. This may have been the case. However, several pieces of data offer the competing explanation that the teachers deferred to the administrators because of their status positions. Two illustrations are particularly interesting in light of this hypothesis. During the first several months of the group's life one of the teacher members suggested that the group work to create a product which would focus on teacher development rather than on assessing children's affective growth. During two meetings in November, two in December and one in January she persisted in verbalizing this desire. Her attempts, however, were unsuccessful, for the group decided to work on developing an "instrument" focused on measuring children's growth. Some months later, however, the same suggestion was posed by one of the administrators. The suggestion met with a quite different response--not only was it acted upon enthusiastically, but it was treated as a new idea. Commenting on a similar situation when the work of two teachers was essentially ignored by the group members, Teacher D made the following observation:

> I thought the work Teacher A and Teacher C did had little impact on the group. . . . When they brought it back to the group as a whole, they [the group members] really dropped it. I think it was the whole pecking order thing involved. It did not emanate from Administrator A, Administrator B or Administrator C. (Second Interview, p. 23)

The effects of status differences has been observed in other studies. Perhaps one of the closest parallels can be seen in Smith and Keith's (1971) study of an innovative elementary school and the attempts of the faculty and administration to implement a democratic decision making structure. The researchers found that in spite of what the formal policy stated and regardless of the "group process" line spoken by the principal, the principal continued to retain administrative

control. As Smith and Keith stated, "the principal is principal" (p. 244). In another study, Bass (1965) focused upon the relationship between the status and influence of managers attending a management training institute away from their place of work. No group leaders were appointed, and no member was placed in a group with his immediate superior. However, status in the company appeared to determine the amount of influence possessed by individuals in the group. And finally, reviewing several pieces of literature which suggest that administrators gain more power under conditions of participatory decision making than under conditions where an administrator serves as the leader of the group, Alutto and Belasco (1972) make the following statement:

> by allowing subordinates to participate in decision making, superiors gain influence over the actions of individual role performers. As a participation franchise is extended and superiors relinquish complete control over decisions they gain both increased certainty concerning the actions of their subordinates (encouraging commitment through involvement) and increased influence over a widespread set of decisional issues (gaining in the legitimate exercise of authority). (p. 117)

In summary, participatory decision making has been viewed as a style of working through which the status differences among the participants are reduced so that persons of various status positions are able to work together as equals. Contrary to this view of participatory decision making, the data from the OEEG and from other case studies suggest that hierarchical differentiation may pose serious impediments to the successful adoption of a participatory decision making style. The ideas of members may not be treated with equal deference because of the status differences between individual members. In fact, some researchers suggest that the participation process provides the higher status group members with more opportunities to use their power, with the result that their influence on those with less status actually increases.

## Conclusion

Several researchers have suggested the use of participatory strategies in groups engaged in creative problem solving or those attempting to develop innovations. In some groups the use of participatory strategies may facilitate the ability of the group members to create "better" innovations and to implement their products with greater ease. The analysis of the Open Education Evaluation Group suggests that there may be an important difference between the desire of the members to use these strategies and their ability to use them effectively. The members of the OEEG tried to use participatory strategies as they attempted to develop an innovative assessment product. After fifteen months of working, they failed in their task. The analysis suggested they encountered several difficulties in making participatory strategies workable in the group. Some of the problems experienced by the OEEG may have been caused by factors which were idiosyncratic to that group. Other problems, however, may stem from assumptions about participatory decision making which are not universally applicable to problem solving groups. Some of these assumptions have been examined in this presentation.

First, those who suggest that locally based practitioners develop innovations assume that these individuals possess the requisite skills to accomplish the task--that, for example, practical experience in teaching and in school administration would prepare educators to develop innovations and to solve problems in areas where the practitioners have little or no formal training. The OEEG members, it has been argued, did not possess the skills to accomplish their task. Other groups may have similar skill deficiencies.

Second, participatory decision making advocates argue that group members collectively will perform the functions normally assumed by the chairperson. The

analysis of the OEEG suggests that shared responsibility may be interpreted by the group participants to mean that no one has the responsibility to attend to the task maintenance functions. To the extent that the participants ignore these functions, decision making becomes increasingly difficult. Establishing closure through consensus particularly is hindered when no one assumes responsibility for requesting a sense of the participants' opinions on an issue. Agenda items are easily ignored or avoided if no one focuses the group's attention on these topics.

Third, the attempted fulfillment of self-oriented needs can interfere with task accomplishment in a group. In the OEEG the members' concern for affiliative relationships appeared to impede the group's ability to reach product goals. Such behavior patterns as avoiding conflict, not completing homework assignments, and voicing more commitment to the "group as a group" than to the group as a committee with a task to accomplish tended to interfere with the members' ability to achieve task completion.

Fourth, social theorists have suggested the feasibility of having individuals with different ascribed status positions work together as equals in task groups. However, the data both from the OEEG meetings and from other case studies suggest that those with higher ascribed status have substantial influence in the group and are generally deferred to by those of lower ascribed status. This evidence would appear to suggest that it is important for the members of a group to recognize the problems which may be involved in having persons from different levels of the hierarchy work together. It cannot be assumed that everyone's ideas will be treated equally, and the participants would be well advised to institute processes which will better enable them to deal with ascribed status differences.

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